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SUBJECT: DHI QAR ELECTION OVERVIEW

(U) This is a PRT Dhi Qar message.

11. (SBU) Summary. Elections preparations in Dhi Qar Province have been running smoothly, with a high degree of cooperation between the Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Voter enthusiasm appears to be weaker than in 2005, and lower overall turnout is expected. PRT contacts suggests that Da'wa and Fadhilah will be the leading vote-getters, displacing the governing ISCI party, and that independents may do well. Given voter cynicism about the ability of politicians to address local issues, national issues will also play a significant factor in voter decision making. In the absence of specific endorsements by Shi'a religious leaders, voter preferences will remain fluid until the election. End summary.

#### Election Preparation

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12. (SBU) While attending the January 10 elections and security meeting at the Mittica training center, Ahmed Abdul Dakhil, security advisor to the Dhi Qar GEO, gave an upbeat assessment on the state of elections preparations. He viewed administrative issues as a greater source of risk than security concerns. Contrasting the upcoming election with those conducted in 2005, he attributed the increased level of calm to planning by Dhi Qar's experienced elections personnel, the growth in security personnel numbers, and better training for security personnel.

13. (SBU) The GEO has been engaged in regular outreach activities. It is working closely with the implementers of PRT-funded QRF projects providing grassroots education through community meetings, elections simulations, billboards, and NGO election monitoring. We anticipate similar cooperation with six recently approved Iraq Rapid Assistance Program (IRAP) agreements for NGOs to conduct further outreach meetings. The GEO is organizing UNOPS-sponsored conferences for key leaders and placing posters or billboards provided by the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC).

#### Weak Voter Enthusiasm

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14. (SBU) Both the GEO and a media contact who closely follows the elections told the PRT recently that they believe voters in Dhi Qar are less enthusiastic about the 2009 than the 2005 elections. Both predict a lower turnout this time. The media contact said that candidates were complaining to him that voters looked at them skeptically and jumped to unfavorable conclusions upon learning that they were standing for office. The Provincial Council's first term soured voters to the point that even an NGO conducting voter education activities in December was dismissed by participants as part of the political apparatus and faced a challenge in convincing communities to participate in the training. In his view, given the lack of confidence by voters that elected officials can solve problems at the local level, provincial elections will be seen as a referendum on

party policies promoted on the national stage rather than as an opportunity to debate the future direction of the province. National issues include the question of whether and how to form a southern region and the status of Kirkuk.

#### Handicapping the Race

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15. (SBU) According to an NGO contact, those who do vote are likely to seek independent candidates or vote for different parties than in 2005. Provincial religious leaders have called on voters to participate but have declined to make the specific endorsements that occurred in earlier elections. PRT contacts and staff, handicapping the contest, have predicted that Da'wa and Fadhilah are likely to be the largest vote-getters, displacing the ruling ISCI party. There is some indication that disaffected voters could possibly go for more explicitly secular candidates, such as Ayad Allawi's list or the tribally-backed slates, but not in sufficient numbers to challenge the established leading parties.

16. (SBU) Recent PRT contact with the provincial government indicates that its decision-making has been virtually at a stand-still during the election season. Officials are attempting to avoid decisions that may be affected by a change in government.  
CROCKER